

Trump executive order shakes cultural organizations: 'There's a lot that we just don't know'

Librarians and museum leaders warn key programs are at risk as Trump targets the Institute of Museum and Library Services

By **Malcolm Gay** Globe Staff, Updated April 3, 2025, 3:52 p.m.



"There's a lot that we just don't know," said Museum of African American History president and CEO Noelle Trent. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

One program supports interlibrary loans, another offers users across the state access to wide-ranging research databases, while a third, LEA, provides statewide access to ebooks

and audiobooks.

These are just a few programs that librarians and museum leaders warn are in jeopardy as the Trump administration seeks to scale back the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which funds libraries, museums, and other cultural organizations.

President [Trump targeted the agency in an executive order last month](#) as one of seven he wants “eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law.”

The little-known agency awarded \$8.5 million to Massachusetts institutions in fiscal year 2024 — supporting everything from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners and the Museum of African American History to local historical societies and Zoo New England.

The full extent of the order remains unclear, but on Monday the IMLS placed nearly all of its roughly [70 employees on paid administrative leave](#). The move followed the replacement of IMLS acting director Cyndee Landrum with deputy secretary of labor Keith E. Sonderling.

Massachusetts library and museum leaders said lack of clarity has thrust their organizations into a state of profound uncertainty. Grant recipients say they’re unsure whether they’ll receive the rest of their awarded funds, which often come as reimbursements, making it difficult to chart a course forward for critical programs and initiatives, many of which they’ve already launched.

“There’s a lot that we just don’t know,” said Noelle Trent, president and chief executive of the Museum of African American History, with locations in Boston and Nantucket. The museum, which Trent said has an annual operating budget around \$3 million, landed a \$500,000 IMLS grant last year, its largest federal award in recent memory.

The grant was intended to help fund four full-time positions that would develop field trip offerings, outreach, and programming at the museum’s historic sites.



The Museum of African American History is one of numerous Massachusetts-based cultural organizations that may be affected by President Trump's changes to the Institute of Museum and Library Services. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

“It’s daunting because we’re not sure if we will receive the remainder of the money,” said Trent, whose organization received a tranche of the grant prior to the executive order. “Our intention is to move forward, because this was the linchpin to our growth as an organization.”

The state’s largest single IMLS grant recipient — at \$3.6 million last year — is the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. The MBLC uses the funds to support a variety of statewide programs, including research databases, the interlibrary loan service, and the ebook platform LEA.

MBLC director Maureen Amyot said cuts to its IMLS funding “would be felt across the entire state.”

“These services are so heavily used by residents that cuts to the funding would have an impact on every single community,” she said. “These are services that it would be really

difficult for us to absorb into our budget.”

Barb Fecteau, a librarian at Beverly High School, said nearly every one of her students uses the research databases the Board of Library Commissioners provides with IMLS support, calling them “paramount.”

“This is something that’s available to every kid in the state,” said Fecteau, who is also president of the Massachusetts School Library Association. She added that most districts wouldn’t be able to afford the databases on their own. “It’s just a huge amount of resources we’d be losing.”

An MBLC spokesperson said Thursday that while some states have received letters to inform them their IMLS grants are terminated, “we have not received ours yet.” She added that the state agency is planning to cut some services, though the reductions will not immediately affect interlibrary loans, research databases, or the ebook platform.

Established in 1996, the [IMLS awarded more than \\$266 million last year](#) to support museums, libraries, and other cultural organizations. By contrast, the [total proposed budget for the National Endowment for the Arts](#) this year was roughly \$210 million, while [the National Endowment for the Humanities proposed budget](#) came in at around \$200 million.

The executive order has been criticized by numerous national library and museum groups, which have urged the administration to reconsider.

In a statement immediately following Trump’s order, the American Library Association called the order “[short-sighted](#),” adding that it “is cutting off at the knees the most beloved and trusted of American institutions.”

The agency’s board has also weighed in on the matter, stating in [a letter](#) to Sonderling last week that multi- and current-year grants “constitute statutory obligations.”

“All such statutory obligations may not be discontinued or delayed under an Executive Order or other executive action,” wrote the board.

The IMLS did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Following his installation last month as IMLS’s acting director, Sonderling said the agency would “focus on patriotism, ensuring we preserve our country’s core values, promote American exceptionalism and cultivate love of country in future generations.”

Changes to the IMLS come as President Trump has sought greater influence in the cultural sphere, taking particular aim at “wokeism.” He seized control of the Kennedy Center in February, and last week he signed a separate [executive order](#) targeting the Smithsonian Institution, which he said had “come under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology.”

Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, executive director and chief executive of the Peabody Essex Museum, said the IMLS has awarded the Salem institution more than \$2.4 million over the past 25 years, including two recent grants totaling \$500,000.

“IMLS funding plays a crucial role in supporting PEM’s mission,” Hartigan said in a statement to the Globe. She added that the awards have gone toward things such as public accessibility and educational programs for area students. “Without this support, museums like ours — and many others across the country — could face challenges in maintaining the high standards of care, scholarship, and accessibility that our visitors rely on.”



Sebastian Belfanti, executive director of the West End Museum, is concerned about a \$75,000 award from the IMLS. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Any potential loss of funding would be particularly hard for smaller organizations, some of which rely on IMLS grants to finance staff positions or implement growth-related programs.

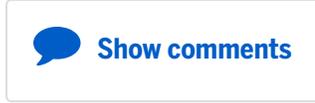
Boston's West End Museum received a \$75,000 grant last year, a sizable award for the neighborhood museum with an annual operating budget of around \$500,000. Executive director Sebastian Belfanti said the grant, which funds numerous pilot programs, is key to the museum's long-term growth plan.

"They're not programs that we have any intention of canceling," said Belfanti. He added that he received notice late Wednesday night that the NEH had terminated a separate \$25,000 award to the museum.

Belfanti said if the IMLS award doesn't come through, he'll be in the difficult position of having to fund-raise once an event or program has ended.

“We are just working on hope,” he said. “It isn’t a viable strategy to stop.”

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